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A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH.

A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE SOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, BOSTON, ON THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF ITS DEDICATION, JANUARY 8, 1882,

Ent. 9/19/34

BY

EDWARD E. HALE.

BOSTON:
GEORGE H. ELLIS, PRINTER, 141 FRANKLIN STREET.
1882.

FRANCIS H. BROWN,
Hotel Landsdown

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"Do all to the glory of God."—I. Cor. x., 31.

It is twenty years ago since I took this text, on a Wednesday evening, to preach in this church for the first time. The church has welcomed crowded assemblies since, but never a denser crowd than on that occasion of its baptism. In the presence of that assembly, and with the sympathy and help of the ministers of our sister churches, we dedicated the church

To the Glory of God our Father,
To the Memory and Gospel of his Son, and
To the Communion and Fellowship of the Spirit.

We asked no bishop or other priest to dedicate it for us. It was our own church, built by our own money, nay, some of us had put our own hands to the building. With one united voice, as a congregation should, we dedicated it to religious purposes.

It was in the first year of the Civil War, at a moment which was, for many reasons, one of the darkest periods of that war. So complete was the depression of men's hope for the future, that this was, I think, the only important public building attempted in Boston that year. Our parish had determined on the work before the bolt fell. Some of us thought — I thought — that there was no real danger of its falling. After we were committed to the enterprise, the bolt did fall. But our enterprise was in the hands of men not accustomed to stop when they had begun. The church carried through its plans. It built this well-nigh perfect house of worship. In a year or two more, for those we had left behind, it built the convenient Unity Chapel,

which is still the property of this congregation. And no person has ever regretted the new departure which we took in coming here.

To pause for a moment on such reminiscences, it was on that evening that we first read together the Scripture in responsive service. That custom the church has maintained ever since, and I have been glad to see that it passes from us into other Congregational churches. I was amused to see, the other day, that an ignorant writer called it a "Semi-Episcopal custom." That is exactly what it is not. In giving to the people their place in reading the Scripture, it is a purely popular or congregational custom. It is the one democratic or popular custom of the English Church, and the custom in which that church differs from the Roman Church, and other churches which are wholly under the domain of bishops,— that is, are purely Episcopal. It typifies particularly two congregational principles: first, that the Bible is the natural prayer-book of Protestants; second, that, with the congregation — that is, with the assembly of worshippers — are the heart and soul and life of the institutions of public worship, not with any outward or separate authority.

Well, twenty years have taught their lessons. War — God be praised! — has given place to peace. We wrote on the walls of the church, "Glory to God in the Highest," when the church was built; but not till April 3, 1865, three years after, did we dare add the other half of the legend, "Peace on earth, good-will to men." * The country is now winning the blessings of peace in prosperity, which the wildest did not dare predict in those anxious days. This city has shared that prosperity. It has increased fifty per cent. in population, faster perhaps in wealth. In our own communion, as I showed at the meeting of the Suffolk Conference, the increase has been larger than the growth of population. And what is the fruit which should be harvested

* See NOTE at the end of this sermon.

from all Christian seed-time, it is certain that on any estimate of crime, of poverty, of the progress of education, and of the comfort of homes, the people of the city have gained appreciably in these twenty years. In these twenty years, a generation has grown up in which there are active men and women who hardly remember what war was,—what it was to tear open a newspaper in the morning eager for tidings from the battle. Two or three years ago, a near friend spoke to me of this church as the "dear old church"; and when he spoke I felt a throb of joy that time was beginning to rub off the crudeness of what was new. Much has changed in the outward methods of life. The leaders of the people have changed. The aspects of society have changed in many things. The places of the homes of four-fifths of the people who built this church have changed. The church was then far at the South End of Boston. It is now in the very centre of Boston. But worship and the need of worship have not changed. Charity and the best way to administer it have not changed. Nay, all love, the love which welcomes the stranger, and tries, Sunday after Sunday, to make this place a home to all who will come,—love has not changed and cannot change. After twenty years, we need not change by the faintest inflection the words of the dedication. This church is still here, consecrated

> To the Glory of God our Father,
> To the Gospel and Memory of his Son,
> To the Communion and Fellowship of the Spirit.

And to say this of *twenty* years is, of course, very little. But twenty years or two hundred, this is all one. Our brethren of the First Church in Hingham, the church whose venerable minister, Mr. Lincoln, ordained me to the ministry thirty-six years ago, celebrates this day the two hundredth anniversary of its building. Its original building, a beautiful specimen of the colonial architecture, still stands. Those walls have echoed to the fathers' version of the Psalms, as sung by men and women who crossed in the "May-

flower." * But two hundred years have not changed the central necessity of life for which that church was built, this church, and all churches. They are built that we may the better own God's love, feel his presence, and live by his law.

The necessities for which churches are built do not change. Faith, hope, and love are the unchangeable centres of human life. God does not change, nor his purposes. But the whole object of Jesus Christ, and the enginery he established, was to bring man nearer to God, and better able to comprehend his purpose and will. Where the earth had befogged man, Christ meant to lift him from the fog. Where the earth had bedrugged him, Christ meant to lift him to life. And he succeeded. It is, therefore, in the very nature of Christianity to make each generation more able to interpret the Word of God. That was the very business intrusted to the Saviour. The world is to come nearer God. All the more will it hear his whisper, all the more often will that voice silence its clamor. "Nearer to God" in its diplomacy, in its manners, in its arts, and in its laws. Nearer to him, when its pure in heart try to see him. Nearer, when its prophets try to interpret him. Most unchristian would be its efforts, if it threw away such vantage. The life of Christ makes science worthy the name. How mad, if the Church of Christ forbid science to interpret the Scripture, the heart of man, or the physical laws of God! The life of Christ brings all nations into the closest ties. How mad is the Church of Christ, if, while it carry his gospel to every land, it speak to those who sit in darkness, as if God had left himself without witness among them! The life of Christ has purified and sanctified society. How mad in the Church if she choose to say

* Mr. Charles Deane, who is the highest authority, has kindly sent me the following note which names the "forefathers" who may have worshipped in the Hingham meeting-house. "John Alden, said to be the last survivor of the signers, died in 1687, so he *could have been present* at the raising of the present building (meeting-house) at Hingham in 1681, though eighty-two or eighty-three years old. So might Elizabeth (Till·e) Howland at the age of seventy-five, and Mary (Allerton) Cushman at the age of eighty-one, and Resolved White and his brother Peregrine, born in Cape Cod Harbor in 1620, and John Cooke, and perhaps some others who were children in 1620, and survived that terrible mortality of 1620."

that, in the face of such purity and sanctity, she will take the days of Constantine for her golden age, the bishops of his court for her interpreters of the Father, and that century of darkness, which followed on the first miserable coquetry of the Roman Empire with Christianity, as the century which shall be to her her authoritative index and interpreter of theology!

God never changes. Religion never changes. But, praise God, his children come nearer to him, and yet nearer. No step of vantage of theirs is lost. Paul, John, and Peter do not die in vain. Ambrose, Dante, and Milton do not sing in vain. Bernard, Fénelon, and Wesley do not preach in vain. The company of all saints are not martyred in vain. The company of all souls does not pray in vain. No, not a tear-drop on a child's cheek in vain, as she has striven to be purer! No, not a smile of ecstasy in vain, as she has risen from her prayer! We are not struggling alone. We are one body of many members. And, if one rejoice, all rejoice; if one triumph, all triumph. The Lord Jesus did not fail. He succeeds. Steadily and surely, he brings men to be more at one with God, the great victory for which he died. Because he succeeds, man is not unchanged.

The true Church thus takes care not to fall into the worst vice of secular governments. Their most frequent failure is that they insist that all shall be done as it has been done. The new secretary must follow the precedent of the old. He must write on the same sized paper. He must file his letters with the same red tape. But the true Church, more wise, bids each man serve, as he has opportunity, with the full power of God's spirit. It bids him seek that spirit in the full fervor of his own unprompted prayer. It dares not speak of the permanent orders of its service. It does not claim for any servant any delegated authority. It says to all God's children, Ye are all kings and all priests, as fast as Christ calls you.

If I am a child of God, alive with his life, tending to him, as from him I sprung; if I am going to render to

him my infinite allegiance, my allegiance uncontrolled, unrestricted, unbounded,—it is of course impossible that I shall ask any other man to discharge for me duty so august or to render homage so high. I will not send a servant to my Father with my birthday offering. Nay, I will not charge any brother, though my dearest, to say for me that I love him who is the Father of us both. I will rush myself into his presence. My offering may be a wretched one; but I will, at least, bear it in my own hand, and I will meet for myself the raptures of his smile. My language will be halt and lame. But, my eloquent brother's, what is that when I come to compare it with the Eternal Word? Better my blundering speech, where I speak to my God *myself*,—better, "Help thou mine unbelief," than any language the most decorous, in any methods the most chaste, which I can address him by an envoy.

Such are the feelings and the principles which induced the formation of this church as a purely independent church in the Congregational system. You sometimes hear speculators, who tell you that such a system answered for a little while among the intense religionists who settled the Bay here two hundred and fifty years ago, but that, as time passes on, it must give way to the more stately and more clearly organized forms of aristocratic systems, not tinctured by that democratic spirit which was and is in all a Puritan puts his hand to. But the leading illustration in history looks the other way.

When the carefully organized oligarchical system of Moses, for the maintenance of the religious administration of Israel, had been completely destroyed by the conquest of the Hebrew nation, one little fragment of that nation was taken into captivity at Babylon. After fifty or sixty years of that captivity, CYRUS, the greatest monarch of his day, and in some points of any day, permitted fifty thousand of them to go back to Judah;—about as many people as are in our city of Denver to-day. This handful of people was directed by

somebody, no one knows whom, to meet once a week for worship and reading of the law in such meeting-houses as each village could furnish. Though there were only ten, every Sabbath day they were to meet together. And they did so. Pure congregations, of pure democratic habit, wholly without government from without, almost without government within, generally without priests, grew up in every Jewish village. They resembled each other in this only, that these meetings of people sought the living God and worshipped him. These were the first Congregational churches in the world.

Well, time has passed by, and that one institution has outlived every other. The Jewish nation has tried one and another form of oligarchy and aristocracy, which have been trampled out in blood. Cyrus's empire has passed through many a change. Alexander's empire, Augustus's empire, have risen and have fallen. The empire of popes has risen, and seems to be falling now. But the synagogues or meeting-places of these Jews remain to this day. They might have done more and been more. Those of them which became Christian congregations have done more and been more. But, such as they are, they have maintained the power and the dignity of that race of men which has worked most wonders in the world. And when, a few years ago, the Shah of that Persia, the direct successor of Cyrus and his pomp, wearing jewels perhaps which had sparkled on the tiara of Cyrus himself, came to the West to Moses Montefiore and the Rothschilds and the other princes of Israel, asking, almost on his knees, that they would lend him a little money that he might patch up the gaping chasms which open beneath his throne,— when these men of Israel laughed at the Persian beggar, and refused and sent him home, they may well have felt that Israel had paid any debts she owed to Persia. Such power of Israel this day she owes not to any hierarchy of priests. That is all gone. It is to no aristocracy of a hereditary succession, as to sons of Levi, or an ordination from one generation to another.

That is all gone. Israel owes it all to the pure democratic or congregational institution of the independent "meeting-house," in every place to which Israel may wander.

But, in saying this, I am led a little from to-day's purpose. Let us use the pleasant memories of twenty years in a church we have learned to love, to consecrate that church anew to worship, to hospitality, to charity, and to the nobler education of all who will gather here. And these last all depend in fact on the heartiness with which we commit ourselves, together as one company, in the first. For, unless a church is eager in its worship, it has neither heart nor life for its work of education, of hospitality or of charity.

People tell me sometimes that the Puritans' plan is becoming old-fashioned, the plan by which people, who did not choose to tie themselves by any creed, simply agreed to "walk together" in their effort to abate temptation and to keep passion down. And I often hear moral voluptuaries, who expect to please themselves and to escape from temptation at the same moment, who tell me, indeed, that public worship, the united worship of the church, does not "attract them." They say they prefer to commune with God alone, perhaps by a babbling brook, perhaps in the comforts of a library. I do not see what your preference has to do with it. I never heard that anybody asked what you preferred. I do not know that any one cares. That is not the question. "What does the world need?" that is the question. To that question, the answer is that the world needs more union and less separation. It needs more of the "together" and less of the "alone." It needs the unity of the spirit, instead of diversity of form. And so the world needs that, like a man, you bear your brother's burdens, instead of posturing, like a fool, under your own. Let each man apply that rule, by giving his countenance, presence, and help in some religious society. And let him give such sympathy really, with his whole heart. Let it come just as you give your attention to the af-

fairs of a bank in which you are a director or of a railway which you have set out to build. Certainly, men are not abandoning the "*together*" in any other sphere of life. Syndicates for good purposes, rings for bad purposes, caucuses for politics, societies for reform, are the special signs of our time. In such a time, it is hard to make me believe that the society formed before any of these modern associations, the society called the "Church of Christ," is a mistake, is out of place, or unfit for the time and occasion. And this follows, that everybody not confessedly irreligious must sustain it and carry it forward, unless he accept the heresy of the Roman Catholics, who profess that only the priesthood is the Church, and assign to them the thinking for all mankind. Everybody must help. And this help is not a now and then help, not an occasional attendance on Sunday, when the day is not fine enough for a drive. It is the sort of loyal support which you give to the other institutions which you believe in, the support you give to the school which educates your children, to the factory to which you owe your income, or, indeed, if you be a patriot, to the government you believe in and love.

Speaking as a clergyman, I have not the slightest modesty or mock modesty about urging people to give personal attendance in church as a very requisite and central duty. It is not that I ask them to hear me preach. It is not that I ask them to hear the choir sing. It is that I ask them as, if I had the right, I would order them to join other men in the recognition of God and of his worship. And precisely as you rally men to an election, when an election day comes round which you think critical, so I would rally men to united worship always, because it is always important. You do not ask the voter to vote, because it will amuse him or feed him or give him drink. You ask him, because the country needs a full vote. And I do not ask a man to go regularly to church, because it feeds him or clothes him, but because the country — nay, mankind in a thousand necessities — needs public

worship. If the man turn on me, if he say, "What good will it do me?" why, I have only to reply, "Dear friend, you cannot help yourself, unless it be in your heart, first of all, to help your fellow-men."

With hopes like these, with prayers that such hopes may not be in vain, with a conviction that our association as a church or congregation is not an incident of life, but a central necessity of life, we start forward together on another twenty years. May God so help us that all that we do shall be done to his glory, and all that we say be to his glory said. We will try to make our congregation more social; we will try to make our children more glad; we will try to entertain strangers; we will do our best as we sing our hymns; we will do our best as we preach our sermons. We will make our attendance regular and our service solemn. But none of these things shall be our end. These shall come in as so many parts and methods of our worship. Our end is to draw nearer to each other in the unity of the Spirit, and nearer to God in the life of his children. First, last, and always, our object here is pure religion!

NOTE.— A member of the church has told, in the following verses, the story referred to on page 4.

OUR CHURCH LEGEND.

When in our sadness we hallowed our altar,
Strange through war's clamors the Christmas chimes rung;
Yet to their gospel our faith did not falter:
"Glory to God in the highest!" we sung.
Waiting, believing,
Round our cross wreathing,
"Glory to God in the highest!" we hung.

Hushed then the turmoil; and peace, like an angel,
Breathed o'er our hearts in the Christmas refrain;
And round our altar we twined the "evangel,"
"Peace upon earth, and good-will unto men,"—
Through the land surging,
Chastened by scourging,—
"Peace upon earth, and good-will unto men."

"Glory to God in the highest" for blessing
Poured on our land in the gift of thy peace!
Hasten the time when, thy spirit possessing,
Discord and war through the nations shall cease.
Through Christ our redemption,
Heal all contention:
His *love* give thy children, and to thine earth *peace*.

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